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Navigating egalitarian culture and accountability pressures: shared instructional leadership practices of Danish school leaders

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Abstract

Purpose – Our study presents insights from an exploratory qualitative case study conducted in three primary and lower secondary schools in Denmark, a country renowned for its collaborative and egalitarian culture, to unravel the complexities of shared instructional leadership.

Design/methodology/approach – Interviews with principals, middle leaders, and teachers and document analysis were used to identify themes according to shared and instructional leadership perspectives.

Findings – The study yielded three major findings. First, Danish principals structure schools to prioritize student learning outcomes and distribute responsibility to middle leaders and teachers. Second, reflection among teachers and leaders better prepares them for future demands and obligations. Third, collaboration underpins principals' vision of reflection and professional development.

Practical implications – The research team's reflection on the data collected can be used to build future strategies to address unpredictable student learning progression and poor-performing teachers.

Originality/value – Together, these findings contribute to the broader understanding of shared instructional leadership and demonstrate how principals face external pressure for accountability and how egalitarian culture influences principals' practices.

Keywords Instructional leadership, Shared leadership, Culture, Accountability, School leadership

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

There is a global trend to reform educational systems so students may perform better in competitive international exams (Waldow and Steiner-Khamsi, 2019). Closely related to this trend is a keen political interest in what constitutes high-quality school leadership and the competencies required of school leaders. Such interest has led to system policy demands that press school leaders to produce tangible results (Gunter *et al.*, 2016), emphasizing high student achievement on standardized tests (Verger, 2018). Accordingly, many scholars have

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focused on how principals can impact student learning by influencing teachers' practices (Özdemir *et al.*, 2022; Leithwood *et al.*, 2020; Supovitz *et al.*, 2010). Given its focus on improving school teaching and learning processes, instructional leadership has come to the fore in this line of research (Hallinger *et al.*, 2020; Robinson *et al.*, 2008; Shatzer *et al.*, 2013). However, there have also been questions about the applicability of instructional leadership in different cultural contexts (Hallinger, 2018; Keddie, 2013). The relevant research has highlighted the importance of national culture and educational systems on how instructional leadership is enacted in varying contexts (Qian *et al.*, 2017; Truong and Hallinger, 2017; Shaked *et al.*, 2021).

While acknowledging progress over the last few decades in understanding the influence of culture and context on school leadership, Dimmock (2020) advocated the need for four types of studies to sharpen understanding further. These included meta-studies of large data sets, socio-educational studies locating leadership in a social setting or context, system reform studies based on initiatives to improve education systems, and indigenous studies of school leadership accounting for the uniqueness of societal cultures. Addressing three of these suggestions, *our study examines the enactment of instructional leadership in Danish primary public schools, where the interplay between egalitarian values and recent educational reforms offers an intriguing landscape for exploration. By investigating how Danish principals navigate their roles in an environment valuing democratic participation, we aim to contribute to the ongoing dialogue about instructional leadership's potential in diverse cultural settings.*

To achieve this aim, we used a qualitative case study approach to answer the question: How does instructional leadership unfold in Danish schools? *Our preliminary findings led us to build our paper on the conceptualization* of *shared instructional leadership,* drawing on the definition of instructional leadership as "school leadership intended to influence school and classroom teaching and learning processes with the goal of improving learning for all students" (Hallinger *et al.*, 2020, p. 1632) combined with Printy and Marks's (2006) assertion that "principals alone cannot provide sufficient leadership influence to systematically improve the quality of instruction or the level of student achievement" (p. 130).

The Danish cultural and educational context

Public schooling in Denmark

Approximately 78% of Danish children are enrolled in the public school system (Danish Ministry of Education, 2021), which encompasses pre-primary (grade 0), primary (grades 1–6), and secondary (grades 7–9) schooling, as well as an optional grade 10. The education system involves three levels of governance. First, the parliament designs and adopts education legislation. The next level encompasses the 98 municipalities responsible for running public schools and ensuring satisfactory results. Each municipality determines the financial framework for its respective schools and hires school leaders. The third level is school leaders themselves. The leader has the autonomy to build a unique culture that reflects local community values, oversees and accepts responsibility for the school's finances and educational outcomes, and hires co-management and teachers (Danish Ministry of Education, 2022).

Culture and leadership expectations

Danish culture is known for its strong emphasis on equality, individualism, and work-life balance (Østergård, 1992). In Denmark, a sense of community, trust, and transparency are valued in personal and professional relationships (Enehaug *et al.*, 2019). Hofstede (1984) noted that Denmark is one of the world's most egalitarian countries, marked by a relatively low power distance in society. Accordingly, Danish schools are characterized by a flat (non-hierarchical) organizational structure (Andersen *et al.*, 2018; Uljens *et al.*, 2013), where principals are generally regarded as "the first of equals" and traditionally prioritize democratic participation and staff and student well-

being (Moos, 2014). Therefore, the flat organizational structure facilitates easy access for teachers, students, parents, and others to contact the school principal (Moos *et al.*, 2005). Additionally, the principal tends to distribute power, particularly to the leadership team and teachers (VIVE, 2019). However, education reforms in Denmark over the last decade (Danish Government, 2013; Danish Ministry of Education, 2016) have challenged principals' traditional roles through increased emphasis on decentralization, accountability, and improved student achievement (Laursen, 2020; Østergaard Møller *et al.*, 2016). While school leaders maintain autonomy to shape institutional visions, their scope for action is restricted by the robust outcome governance expectations embedded within reform measures (Østergaard Møller *et al.*, 2016; Krejsler and Moos, 2021).

Danish leaders operate in a flat organizational structure that allows for open communication and collaboration between staff and leaders (Moos *et al.*, 2005). This creates high trust and transparency in decision-making (Torfing and Bentzen, 2022). Moreover, Danish leaders are not only entrusted with openness and a flat hierarchy but are also expected to prioritize the well-being of their staff (KL and KTO, 2010). These expectations are rooted in the working culture that emphasizes work-life balance and acknowledges the collective effort required to achieve goals (Siim, 2007). Within this context arises the potential for conflict, wherein the leader's dedication to open communication and staff well-being might come into contention with the pursuit of enhanced academic outcomes demanded by the Danish government and municipalities.

Theory and background

Global educational competition has reinforced an outcome-based policy focus in schools (see Sellar and Lingard, 2014; Steiner-Khamsi, 2003; Verger, 2018), aligning school leadership with accountability demands. At the same time, school leaders are expected to deal with many other complex tasks, from administrative duties to student interactions, according to contextual realities and specific school needs (Goldring *et al.*, 2008; Lee *et al.*, 2021). Therefore, school leaders must respond to increasing external demands while creating unique goals and strategies for their schools, which necessitate working effectively with multiple stakeholders (Honig and Hatch, 2004).

Within such a framework, instructional leadership retains prominence, given its particular focus on student learning outcomes. However, it has also been challenged regarding its contextual relevance in different national settings and its potential for more collaborative and shared practices (Printy *et al.*, 2009). In the subsequent section, we elucidate our primary theory and explore how context and shared leadership influence the theoretical comprehension of instructional leadership.

Instructional leadership

The broadly adopted conceptual framework of instructional leadership developed by Hallinger and Murphy (1985) consists of three main dimensions and several subdimensions. Defining the school mission encompasses the principal's role in establishing the school's core purpose, focusing on the ability to collaborate with staff to ensure that the focus of the school's effort is always on student achievement. Managing the instructional program concerns the principal's responsibility for coordinating and controlling instruction and curriculum, requiring a certain level of expertise in teaching and learning. The final dimension, *creating a positive school climate,* suggests that student achievement will rise through a culture of continuous improvement and incentives to support it. Principals should model the relevant values and practices to create and maintain such a culture (Hallinger, 2005).

Instructional leadership and context

Cuban's (2013) black box theory demonstrated that policies are not implemented in schools as intended, resulting in different practices. Therefore, although researchers and policymakers have discussed instructional leadership for decades (Hallinger *et al.*, 2020), applying it in real-

world settings requires more work. For example, Goldring *et al.* (2008) identified the risk that, due to the complexity of tasks and lack of time, leaders might focus only on one dimension of instructional leadership to the detriment of other dimensions. In addition, adopting a leadership concept that has demonstrated its ability in one context will not necessarily yield the same results in a different setting. Accordingly, Clarke and O'donoghue (2017) argue that school leadership researchers must change their focus to "what works in a particular context" rather than just on "what works." Against this backdrop, scholars have focused on how instructional leadership practices are applied in different sociocultural and political contexts.

Three empirical cases illustrate how principals' instructional leadership practices adjust to national cultural contexts. *The first study* (Walker and Qian, 2022) investigated the influence of context on Chinese principals' understanding and enactment of instructional leadership, finding that principals are influenced mainly by the national educational system, which prioritizes academic achievement. School principals, therefore, work to improve their schools through teacher learning and instructional development. As such, related activities become organizational routines in almost all schools. Within China's collective culture, the principals have committed considerable effort to foster teachers' collaboration and peer support to improve instruction.

Second, Shaked *et al.*'s (2021) study showed that low power distance, clan culture, and incomplete identification of principals (and teachers) with their schools' academic missions have significantly shaped the implementation of instructional leadership in the Israeli context. They argued that such contextual forces led principals to resist new, formally defined policy expectations of their role as instructional leaders. For example, providing clear directions, conducting classroom inspections, and providing incentives to successful teachers are uncommon practices for principals in Israel, as they fear these actions might damage the positive relationships and family-like atmosphere prioritized in the clan culture.

Third, based on a reanalysis of existing qualitative studies, Gümüş *et al.* (2021) found that some instructional leadership practices established in the international literature are poorly suited to the Turkish educational and cultural context. For example, a highly centralized and competitive education system hinders school principals' efforts to develop specific school goals. In addition, the lack of instructional supervision is explained by cultural norms, coupled with principals' lack of competence.

Although there has been a global boom in research focusing on instructional leadership during the last two decades, most studies use the initial conceptualizations of instructional leadership with a limited referral to contextualization, if any. The studies mentioned above, along with some other recent research (e.g., Pan *et al.*, 2017; Zeinabadi *et al.*, 2023), have made unique contributions to the literature by providing important insights into the understanding and practice of instructional leadership in different nations by paying particular attention to the role of various contextual factors at the organizational, community, and system levels. However, it should be noted that each study also has its limitations. For example, both Walker and Qian (2022) and Shaked *et al.* (2021) base their results solely on principals' perceptions, neglecting other stakeholders' perspectives. The Gümüş *et al.* (2021) study, on the other hand, reviewed existing studies to create a contextually relevant instructional leadership model. However, most of the studies they reviewed used Western frameworks, limiting their ability to truly explore the role of contextual factors.

Based on the above examples and the other recent relevant studies from different parts of the world, we suggest that the "one-size-fits-all instructional leadership model" must give way to various frameworks that consider national contexts.

Shared instructional leadership

According to Printy and Marks (2006), shared instructional leadership could be a useful conceptualization by recognizing that competent and empowered teachers also greatly

influence the achievement of organizational goals. Therefore, shared instructional leadership focuses on leaders and teachers collaborating to shape a school's learning culture to improve student achievement. Shared instructional leadership is about more than just a single leader. Instead, it focuses on how interactions and collaborations among the leaders, members of the leadership team, and teachers combine to achieve the school's instructional goals (Zhan *et al.*, 2023).

Zhan *et al.* (2023) summarize the four key elements of shared instructional leadership. *Through* shared visions, the leader collaborates with all stakeholders to formulate a joint mission for the school and articulate why and how the vision influences school practice. *Focus on instruction* means the leader collaborates with teachers to improve and align the instructional program, including school culture, parents, professional development, and assessment. Monitoring of progress refers to how leaders collaborate with teachers to evaluate the school's progress toward its goals. *Broad collaboration* encompasses the leaders' work with the outputs of collaboration to inform instructional decisions. As such, a school operating under shared instructional leadership builds on participatory structures and processes.

Thus, shared instructional leadership embraces the idea that effective school leadership relies on delegating responsibility to teachers and co-leaders, recognizing that a single person cannot solely navigate complex demands. Spillane's (2005) notion of distributed leadership, aligning with the shared leadership concept, precisely posits that school leadership transcends the principal's role, extending to various school members. Furthermore, prioritizing data-based inquiry and collaborative practices has become essential for addressing accountability and fostering evidence-based decision-making culture. Schildkamp *et al.* (2019) contend that data-informed decision-making necessitates collaborative efforts among school leaders and teachers in "data teams" to identify patterns in analyzed data for enhancing school outcomes.

In summary, the original approach to instructional leadership stressed the principal's focus on student learning outcomes. The concept has since expanded to include the importance of shared responsibility within schools. Given its egalitarian and collaborative societal culture and increasing policy emphasis on accountability, we believe the Danish context provides a unique case to further the conceptualization and enactment of shared instructional leadership.

Data and methods

School and interviewee selections

This study adopts a single case study approach (Yin, 2018), focusing on data collected from three primary schools within one Danish municipality. Selecting schools from the same municipality ensured a consistent policy framework and organizational structure, facilitating a cohesive and comparable single case study analysis. However, we also intentionally chose sample schools to capture variations in school performance and socioeconomic composition (Flyvbjerg, 2010), thereby enabling a more comprehensive understanding of the case. We utilized Danish Ministry of Education (2022) school records to ensure diversity within the selected schools. We selected one school with lower academic performance and serving a lower socioeconomic status community, one with average performance and socioeconomic composition, and one with higher-than-average exam scores and socioeconomic makeup. While the study's conceptualization was jointly decided by all three authors, the school and interviewee selection processes were mainly executed by the first and the second authors.

For the study sample, we selected formal leaders, such as the principal and vice-principals, and key teachers with special responsibilities within each selected school. Key teachers included teachers with professional and organizational responsibilities. Eighteen

respondents were interviewed across the three schools. The sampling methodology was guided by the assumption that leadership in the Danish context is widely shared (e.g., Printy and Liu, 2021; VIVE, 2019). Middle leaders and teachers are crucial in discerning and implementing organizational initiatives and how broader visions are communicated and enacted. The variety of respondents enables an analytical possibility to compare the differences that emerged in the interviews regarding leadership initiatives, communication, and involvement in improving student achievement. The teacher interviews also acted as a control mechanism to avoid bias from principals overestimating their leadership roles (Andersen *et al.*, 2018).

Data

We used two different qualitative data collection methods: interviews and document analysis. Interviews were the primary data source for the study. Data collection occurred in the three selected schools during the 2021–2022 academic year and was primarily conducted by the first author. Table 1 illustrates the empirical components of the case study and the participants' positions and distribution at the three schools.

The table delineates three distinct interview data sources based on school characteristics: high, middle, and low academic performance within various socioeconomic communities. Each source features a principal, varying numbers of vice principals, and key teachers. Additionally, our data is derived from policy analysis of "vision policies" formulated by the schools themselves.

We examined 12 policy documents that outlined the three schools' strategies for achieving student success. These documents varied in length, encompassing comprehensive reports on leadership, culture, and learning and smaller leaflets explaining the school's approach to learning, teaching, and data collection. Additionally, we conducted a thorough review of the schools' websites. The collection of documents enables us to analyze how the schools communicate their visions of students' achievements to various stakeholders, including teachers, students, parents, and municipal administrators. Additionally, to examine if there are differences between the logic communicated in the collected documents and what the interviewees stated in the interviews. We used document analysis (Bryman, 2016) to analyze the documents and review the websites. The analysis determined how these documents articulated the schools' visions, particularly in the context of learning and school culture.

The interviews were semi-structured (Kvale, 2007) and adhered to a consistent protocol encompassing five sections, as illustrated in the appendix (See Table A4). The questions asked about background information, administration/leadership, student achievement, and school culture. The same protocol was employed for all interviews. Teachers were asked about their attitude towards and experience with school leadership, while principals and

Table 1. Empirical components of the case study and participants

	School characteristics	Principal	Vice principals	Key teachers	Policy/data
1	High academic performance and socioeconomic community	1	2	3	Vision and data about school
2	Middle academic performance and socioeconomic community	1	3	3	Vision and data about school
3	Low academic performance and socioeconomic community	1	2	2	Vision and data about school

Source(s): Authors' own creation/work

vice-principals were asked about their leadership strategies. The semi-structured format ensured that all interviewees covered all themes in the protocol, although not necessarily in the prescribed order. This approach allowed participants to elaborate on the various themes and ensure they understood the study's interest in leadership practices to enhance student achievement. To maintain as much anonymity for the interviewees as possible, the interviews are referred to by the school in the analysis. Only the participants from the individual school knew that the school had participated in the study.

Analysis

The initial data processing involved transcribing the content of all interviews, followed by translation into English. While this process may result in losing some of the original spoken language, our focus is on the content rather than the spoken language itself. Hence, we do not perceive this as a significant issue. After that, the first author processed the data in three rounds of coding (Bryman, 2016) in close collaboration with the second and the third authors, as illustrated in the appendix (see Tables A1–A3). The whole analysis process was outlined jointly by all three authors, and additional discussions were conducted through emails and Zoom meetings whenever needed. The first coding round involved comparing and analyzing the data from the documents and interviews. Although a semi-structured interview protocol with specific themes was followed, our exploratory approach allowed the interviewees to speak freely and elaborate. Accordingly, during the initial data analysis phase, the first author comprehensively reviewed all the transcripts to establish a holistic understanding of the data. Subsequently, a meticulous examination of the interview data was undertaken, which included juxtaposing the data with various documents about the school, as recommended by notable scholars such as Miles *et al.* (2017). This approach facilitated the development of a preliminary overview of the data about the themes of interest.

Building upon the initial data overview presented by the first author to the research team, we drew inspiration from the approach outlined by Shaked *et al.* (2021) to embark upon the second coding round. This phase involved theoretical scrutiny of the initial codes, focusing on leadership practices intertwined with teaching and learning. In this data processing stage, the research team juxtaposed the data with pertinent concepts from the school leadership literature stemming from discussions of shared leadership, cultivating a culture characterized by low power distance, and delegating responsibilities to employees. Through this close examination, where we employed the relevant literature to interpret the data, we generated preliminary categories of leadership practices and identified a diverse array of influences that impacted leadership dynamics within the schools.

In the final stage, the first two authors reviewed the codes and developed a focused and systematic data analysis (Kvale, 2007). Consequently, this analytical step involved aggregating the data analysis into coherent clusters to build an encompassing understanding of the preliminary categories.

Findings

In this section, we introduce the findings of our study under the three main themes that emerged from our analysis: (1) Inside the "engine room": the role of the school leader; (2) reflection as a means of professional development; and (3) the need for collaboration and community-building.

Inside the "engine room": the role of the school leader

Based on our analysis, our first theme focuses on the overall role of leadership in shaping teaching and learning within the three schools under scrutiny. We adopted the 'engine room'

metaphor to express our relevant findings. Drawing inspiration from the intricate mechanisms of a ship's engine room, where essential operations are orchestrated behind the scenes, the metaphor encapsulates school leaders' discreet yet powerful actions. These actions serve as the driving force behind the overall learning culture, outcomes, and environment within the schools.

Regarding the overall role, the participants emphasized that the leaders' foremost responsibility is establishing a conducive learning environment that enables all students to achieve their full potential. This aligns with the emphasis on learning in School One's document, which states: *"Students are involved in their own learning process; learning must be visible, learning must make sense"*. A key teacher explains the influence of the document:

> Now, we have just received a folder [from the leadership] communicating that we are very focused on what we call 'meaning with learning.' We refer to it as . . . In this folder, we have made it very concrete: what it means when we talk about the students' learning.

This quotation illustrates that the teachers' work is closely aligned with student learning, as communicated by the leadership. Furthermore, interviews with teachers at the school confirm that the leaders prioritize communicating the importance of teachers' work directly related to student learning, emphasizing its significance in their practice. Moreover, the principal at School 3 described it as follows:

> No matter what initiatives come from above or elsewhere, we always focus on students' learning and well-being. It is for the children we make school—not others.

However, the interviewees also noted that school leadership is not directly involved in day-to-day teaching activities and does not exert direct control over what happens in individual classrooms. One principal elaborated on this point:

> The teachers are the experts in teaching, and therefore we [the leadership team] let them perform the teaching which is best suited to their case. (Principal at School 1)

There was a consensus among the interviewees that the leaders' job is not to provide direct support or guidance for classroom teaching. For instance, a teacher from School 2 articulated this viewpoint as follows:

> Well, they don't do that [supervise daily teaching practices], though. But I'm not sure if it's a good idea either. I mean, because . . . If it's been 25 years since they were last in the classroom, what help can they provide me?

Principals do not interfere in the daily teaching of teachers; on the other hand, they collaborate with the leadership team to structure and organize teachers' daily teaching in a way that they believe will lead to the most efficient teaching approach in terms of student learning outcomes. This collaborative approach is exemplified in School Three's leaflet, illustrating the school leadership's vision for organizing the school year. The leaflet serves as a "vision leaflet" for personnel, parents, and other stakeholders to comprehend the school's organizational vision. Teachers interviewed at the school confirmed that the leadership effectively communicated their expectations regarding teaching approaches focusing on student learning, mainly through the leaflet. Most of the interviewed principals and vice-principals explicitly stated that their most valuable resource for achieving good results was their teaching staff. As such, the leadership teams worked to establish trust between management and teachers, with listening to the teachers as a critical component. One of the vice-principals explained the importance of trust between management and teachers in this way:

> I think one of the most important things for a well-functioning school is we are close to the staff, know what is moving in the staff, know that we are relevant to the staff . . . It has such an insane impact on how the school works. It is related to the teachers' working environment, but I think it also spreads to

> the classes, so if there is a safe, trusting collaboration between the leadership and the staff, then it is the case as well in the classrooms. (Vice-principal at School 2)

An excellent instance of this type of organizational process orchestrated by school leadership teams is what can be characterized as class conferences (although the investigated schools had different names for this phenomenon, the content and process were the same). At least once a year, the responsible leader (not the principal, but instead a vice-principal attached to the relevant grade level) met with the Danish teacher and the literacy counseling teacher to discuss the results of the national literacy test. A similar process was also followed for mathematics. A teacher from School 2 explained how the school management set the direction for these class conferences:

> So, there are some [mandatory assignments], for example, a reading conference. That is, a structure has been created for how to capture the children who are particularly challenged, both in Danish and also in mathematics. And in such a setting the school management sets the direction for how to handle those children.

One of the vice-principals explained the process as follows:

> Then I attend the class conferences as well, i.e. precisely to have an overview in relation to the student results and their status right now. Moreover, concerning where we must go specifically with regard to the students who may not do as well, but also like having an overview concerning what new policies are relevant to implement. (Vice-principal team at school 3)

As the vice-principal explains, the leaders use the data from the test presented at the conference to gain insight into the overall learning environment in the classroom. The data helps leaders identify literacy challenges for the entire class or individual students, including those not previously detected by the teachers. The discussion at the class conference revolves around which initiatives to implement to improve test results and who will be responsible for specific initiatives. In this regard, the vice-principals at the schools had similar roles in delegating responsibility to the appropriate individuals, such as the literacy counselor or teachers, and occasionally to external stakeholders if in the best interest of students. The principal generally follows up with the vice principals or the individuals assigned roles to ensure students can improve their learning outcomes.

Another example of how the principal operates in the "engine room" of the school to ensure a strong learning culture is initiating local school policies. One principal mentioned that "*at the job interview, leaders must account for their own values" (Principal at School 2).* In this sense, the common denominator is that the interviewed leaders are familiar with the possibilities of creating a vision that adapts to their local community and aligns with the leaders' and municipalities' visions. Thus, the leadership worked to adjust their vision to the contextual culture of the schools, which encompasses differences in how learning is communicated, for example, to parents. In essence, driven by similarities, learning is the common driver. While School 1 conveyed learning as a holistic approach, School 3 emphasized that their institution ensures students acquire valuable skills. Hence, the initiatives at the three investigated schools varied. For example, at School 3, a vice-principal explained:

> We [all at the school but in particular the school leadership] have also worked with our school's learning mindset, so what is essential in the approach to the children? What is vital concerning what creates learning, what makes commitment and motivation among the children?

In the above quote, the vice-principal explains how they and their leadership team direct the mindset of teachers and students toward learning, opportunity, effort, and collaboration. They achieve this by designing the architecture of the classrooms and common areas to support such a mindset. The principal has ensured that the classrooms have large windows and doors to signal that teachers are not alone and that there must be openness in teaching. In

contrast to the usual decorations in Danish schools, the leadership at School 3 also emphasized professional slogans such as "We create winners." It displayed posters featuring the stories of successful individuals. A teacher said, "Yes, they [the leadership] certainly strive to support the teachers' practice to the highest degree, both with physical furnishings and the resources we have available*, for sure*." The same teacher elaborated that the leadership's focus on establishing a learning mindset among the teachers and children also pressures the teachers to ensure their students perform well.

While we observed some nuances in the data, the predominant leadership approaches across schools to foster a collective focus on learning were largely similar. Members of the leadership teams unanimously stressed the importance of aligning with municipal visions and pedagogical approaches. However, there are still some potential specific challenges at each institution. This sentiment is echoed by a key teacher at School 2:

> Timing must be carefully considered, and we should avoid simply accepting directives from the Ministry of Education; instead, we must interpret them ourselves. Adapting these directives to fit our unique school culture, given our diverse community, is essential. Consequently, we must break down the information we receive into smaller, more manageable pieces to facilitate easier handling.

This teacher highlights how policies from higher authorities can sometimes feel disconnected from the practical realities experienced by teachers. Consequently, while principals establish the architecture for ensuring a learning mindset at schools, the teacher indicates that teachers must have the opportunity to contribute their ideas and work with initiatives from above according to their school's unique needs.

Reflection as a means of professional development

The second finding derived from the data was that a common leadership practice involved creating spaces for professional reflection. Schools 1 and 3 have developed policy visions to communicate with teachers, students, and parents about how professional development works in their respective schools. This is articulated, for instance, on School 1's website: "*Teachers and pedagogues are organized in learning communities in the year groups with a high degree of teamwork and professionalism*." One of the key teachers explained the ways they work together with data at the school as follows,

> This is our slightly new focus area again—how we can examine the data together as a team and perhaps gain new perspectives on the matter. Because when you're teaching in a classroom, you can feel a bit constrained by what you see . . . There is a structured conversation that unfolds methodically: asking questions, observing, taking time, and only a few people speaking, followed by evaluation.

The quotation illustrates that the school's teachers work with the visions communicated on the school's website. As the teacher explains, having more eyes to discuss a problematic matter in a structured way helps teachers grow professionally and find the best solution for the student.

During the time of the interviews, School 2 was in the process of developing such a policy. The school was undergoing a transition phase with a new principal and one new vice-principal. The new leadership reflected extensively on transforming the school without losing the teacher collectiveness. The principal stated:

> Couldn't we just learn it from one of the other schools in the municipality? But I just think it is hugely important that the teachers feel involved in it, and even that it is their own knowledge that comes into play. And, now, you work with the municipality pedagogical approach. It is also new thinking for teachers and pedagogues: We must have data on the table.

Overall, the leadership teams in all three schools are committed to improving the learning climate at their schools by establishing organizational structures that support employees in

performing their roles to the best of their abilities. According to the interview participants, making mistakes is fine as long as teachers (and leadership team members) discuss the issues, reflect on how to address them, and use the reflections to improve their practices. One principal described the importance of reflection in nurturing the learning process:

> We [the school leadership team] have then set a requirement that they [teachers] must accommodate - a team meeting must schedule 45 minutes for reflections on their teaching practice. And then, we work in learning circles by saying, 'What kind of data do we have difficulty with here?' Then we reflect and encourage the respective employees that reflect on their practice to try to come up with ideas for solving the problems. (Principal at School 1)

A teacher from School 2 elaborated that at their school, the leadership supports reflective team structures as an opportunity for teachers to discuss shared values and engage in discussions that the leadership believes are important for the school:

> They [the leadership team] try to create a way for us to incorporate data into our teamwork. They have also scheduled all these team meetings about reflection on data . . . Right now, the thing the leaders tell us to reflect on is to build a common understanding of what constitutes the core values at our schools. So that's what we are trying to create now (Teacher at School 2).

At the three schools, "team meetings" referred to various gatherings of faculty, such as Danish teachers teaching grades 1–3 discussing a subject. Teachers are members of several teams, including those from different subjects teaching in the same class. The principals of all three schools scheduled weekly time for team meetings. Tangible data, which encompasses test scores, essays, video productions, and other forms of student information and classroom artifacts, serve as a basis for reflections that can lead to teachers' cognitive recognition of problems and, subsequently, better practices. The school leadership emphasizes the need for teachers to demonstrate their ongoing learning pathways. To draw teachers' attention, the meeting rooms in all three schools were decorated with posters to highlight the benefits of reflection for professional growth. These posters, crafted by the municipal administration, played a significant role in shaping the reflective practices within the schools, thereby influencing the schools' approach to reflective discussions.

Leaders' structuring of the teachers' time underpins the notion that their practice is dynamic and, therefore, deemed significant professional development. Teachers can test different teaching methods at the three schools and adapt them to their respective class levels, allowing for a certain degree of autonomy in developing teaching materials. However, the leadership emphasized the importance of teachers' ongoing development of their practice; thus, failure to do so may result in corrective or disciplinary action by the leaders. One vice principal's explanation exemplifies this:

> What are the right decisions in that they [the teachers] can actually do their job? And then I agree, sometimes, that some unpleasant or tight decisions must be made because some teachers do not perform well enough, and they may never [learn to] do that. And then it goes beyond the kids or the other teaching colleagues who actually want to do a good job. (Vice-principal at School 3)

The vice-principal emphasized that teachers who underperform risk being fired. At School 3, a teacher also highlighted that *"collaboration is expected by the leadership . . . Recently, we've had to bid an indirect farewell to a couple of colleagues who couldn't meet this expectation."* However, this is very rarely the case since firing teachers in Denmark is a complex matter due to the power of the Teachers' Union (Danmarks Lærerforening, DLF), which represents approximately 95% of the teachers nationwide. Overall, the participants indicated that professional development through reflection and ongoing personal growth is a goal of school leadership to ensure that personnel are always in tune with the newest trends and establish benchmarks for themselves. As another school's vice-principal put it:

> That it is always data; hard data is the starting point for a contemporary point of view, and where do we want to go based on that starting point, and what does it take for us to get there? And in that second, we achieve our aim; which new aim to follow? We are all the time on the move. (Vice-principal at School 1)

Overall, our data reveal that the leadership intends that teachers stay alert and be prepared to manage future demands and obligations through reflection. Responsibility through collaboration is, in many ways, the glue that connects schools' leadership and their focus on reflection and professional development.

The need for collaboration and community-building

This section addresses collaboration and community-building, as revealed in the data. One of the strategies municipal administrators and the Ministry of Education use to increase school results involves building a vision for collaboration in schools. The participating schools' visions of collaboration aligned with this type of policy. For example, School 3's website underscores the imperative for collaboration within the school, explicitly outlining various forums for collaboration and the principal's expectations for these interactions. It states: "*We have created a strong, professional, and innovative learning environment where broad and spacious communities are supportive.*" Thus, the visualization of the school's organizational structure revealed clear expectations for teacher collaboration and outlined where and why collaboration is essential.

Overall, the leadership teams in the study communicated municipality-predefined visions of collaboration to the teachers. Teachers collaborate in three ways: between Danish language and mathematics teachers responsible for a class, between teachers teaching at the same grade level, and between mathematics teachers teaching grades 7 to 9. At the investigated schools, the principals and vice-principals emphasized collaboration between teachers as an effective practice to prevent individual teachers from working in isolation. The principal at School 3 stated, *"At our school, you simply cannot be a solo rider,"* while a teacher at the same school explained, "*We do that a lot [collaborate], actually. So . . . I am not a one-person army, not at all. On the contrary."*

Another principal elaborated on how their school's leadership sought collaboration as a means to reduce insecurity:

> I would like to see stronger collaboration in our teams . . . So, my vision is that no matter who starts in our school, I can ensure they get the best possible course. That is, it is not luck if you just got Carl as a teacher or Sofie as a teacher. (Principal at School 2)

A teacher from School 1 explained how teamwork, on the one hand, provides freedom to set the standards for teaching; however, on the other hand, it also requires a certain level of agreement.

> However, there is an expectation from the leadership that Danish teachers (and also math and English teachers) have a close collaboration. The leadership has this expectation, and at one point, there was a policy stating that 80% of the curriculum should be consistent.

The two quotes above reflect the vision for increased team collaboration, intended to establish a shared professional approach among teachers. By working in teams, teachers can support each other and share best practices, reducing the risk of poor performance and providing a space for teachers to share their concerns and uncertainties. As the principal at School 1 explained:

> I think the most important task is to find a way for you as a teacher to know the importance of what you can achieve if you collaborate and use the other teachers' experience. So, it is also about establishing some risk-free spaces. That is, where a team must have a space where the teachers dare

> to say, 'I do not know what to do with this bunch of students,' or 'With Viggo, he does not learn enough, and I think I have tried everything.' (Principal at School 1)

The collaborative team approach was generally equivalent across the schools, with some variation. These variations can be attributed to distinct school cultures shaped by, for example, their unique student foundation. For example, School 1 emphasizes a holistic view of learning and education, while School 3 focuses on ensuring its students acquire the necessary competencies for further education. One way or another, it is the leadership team's job to ensure such collaboration. A key teacher from School 1 described how the leadership builds a structure for strong teacher collaboration there:

> We [the leadership team] have established that, especially from fifth to ninth grade, those are the designated meetings where colleagues can gather. Whether it's on Tuesday, which we refer to as an ad hoc meeting, where you have meetings with your subject team, discussions with the leadership, or it could be a teacher meeting. And on Thursdays, it primarily involves teachers teaching at the same level or engaging in development discussions with . . .

The teachers' team meetings are also an expression of shared responsibility, as teachers have a say in the direction(s) their teaching should take. A key teacher from School 3 explained how the team of literacy experts continually reflected upon the feedback they received from the other teachers:

> So, we function as a guidance team, consisting of me, the LSC (Learning Support Coordinator), along with a DSA (Danish Support Assistant), and a couple of reading specialists. We gather to discuss how we can prepare our colleagues for effectively incorporating relevant strategies into their teaching. Subsequently, the teachers implement these strategies in their classrooms.

The principals and vice-principals also use team development reviews to acquire information about teaching practices and team members' challenges. The reviews aim to enhance teams' efficiency as collaborative units, resulting in an informal team contract between members and, in most cases, their vice-principal, ensuring clarity on responsibilities post-review. Overall, ensuring that teams work as the leadership intends was part of the strategic considerations for student learning at all the schools in the study sample.

Discussion and implications

This study demonstrates how school leaders in the Danish context organize their schools' practices to optimize student learning outcomes and collaborate with others to achieve this goal. Our findings reveal that the leadership teams across all three schools shared similar values, approaches, and practices to enhance student learning. The coherence in their strategies can be attributed to the common policy regime and the working culture underpinning the schools' operations. While discussing the findings, the following section discusses implications for practice, theory, and future research.

Implications for practice

The first finding indicates that Danish school leaders do not directly interfere with or supervise instruction, as they believe that teachers are instructional experts and, therefore, best suited to improve student learning. This approach differs from Hallinger and Murphy's (1985) original instructional leadership model, emphasizing the importance of strong principal leadership to improve teaching and learning. The Danish principals' strategic considerations and distance from the teaching process align with Danish values of trust and collaboration (Torfing and Bentzen, 2022). This approach shows similarities with the instructional leadership practices in some other contexts, such as Israel, where school principals see direct supervision as distrusting (Shaked *et al.*, 2021). Interestingly, shared

instructional leadership also seems to be a common practice in countries such as China, which has stronger supervisory structures. In more developed school systems in China, strong principal leadership works in tandem with shared instructional leadership because of ingrained teacher leadership and mentoring structures (Walker and Qian, 2022). Further research may examine how and why shared instructional leadership plays out in different contexts with apparently opposite value bases and institutional norms.

The analysis further reveals that school leaders delegate certain responsibilities regarding improving student learning to specific teachers. This approach is consistent with the growing literature supporting shared instructional leadership (Hallinger *et al.*, 2020; Neumerski, 2013). Our study highlights how principals use targeted strategies to enable key teachers to implement essential policies and practices that promote improved student learning. For instance, in the Danish context, where the organizational hierarchy is relatively flat, literacy counseling teachers may be tasked with implementing the school's reading policy. This approach aligns with the egalitarian and collective working values that prevail in Denmark (Enehaug *et al.*, 2019). However, our analysis also demonstrates that organizational hierarchy at the school level is also in a transition phase where power is consolidated in leadership. Thus, the distribution of leadership is structured and organized by school leaders and municipality authorities, as they hold legitimate authority to execute power.

The second finding contributes valuable insights into professional development and establishing learning cultures in schools. The results demonstrate how the leadership teams help teachers reflect on data as a professional development strategy, following the belief that such collective reflections and discussions lead to ongoing growth. Teachers who think deeply about their practice will stay updated with student learning processes, leading to improved student outcomes. Such beliefs and subsequent approaches have significantly influenced Danish school policy over the last decade (Krejsler and Moos, 2021). Similarly, leaders acknowledge that teaching connects with multiple circumstances that affect student learning; thus, teachers must discuss their struggles and difficulties to facilitate learning better. While data-driven decision-making for school improvement and the role of school leaders have been well addressed in the existing literature (Halverson *et al.*, 2007; Schildkamp *et al.*, 2019), this finding provides a unique example of shared instructional leadership practice which focuses on the facilitation of data-based reflection process with the aim of teacher growth.

Overall, it is observed that Danish school leaders take a more passive role in the usage of data for improvement and, again, rely primarily on teachers' expertise. This approach seems appropriate as Park and Datnow (2009) emphasize that empowering staff members with expertise in data-driven decision-making could foster a culture of learning and continuous improvement. However, data acquisition, analysis, and usage to make certain decisions are important aspects to consider. Since our data do not provide detailed evidence regarding such processes, we suggest it as an area of focus for future studies in the Danish educational context.

A third finding exposes the leaders' role in organizing and establishing a vision for collaborative teams in their schools. This finding connects with the growing literature about professional learning communities, which emphasize collaboration and collective discussion as effective means to increase student learning (Carpenter, 2015; DuFour and DuFour, 2012; Vescio *et al.*, 2008). The finding also contributes to the instructional leadership literature through insights into the leadership's role as the collaboration architect in this context. The results suggest that school leaders nurture collaboration among teachers that supports their professional development (Hargreaves and Fullan, 2012) and provides a failsafe mechanism against poor-performing individual teachers.

Finally, the principals in our study are required to present their results in an annual qualitative conversation with municipality administrators. Thus, the role of the principal in

organizing structures behind the scenes to emphasize student learning as the most important issue at the schools can be explained by the accountability pressure on principals to deliver on student outcomes. While accountability ideally ensures standardized practices that offer administrators and politicians a clear overview of school performance (Elmore and Fuhrman, 2001), our study demonstrates that it also narrows autonomy and unique school cultures.

Limitations and implications

This study has several empirical and theoretical implications. The present research followed a qualitative case study design; thus, neither the findings allow for causal explanations of leadership effect on student learning, nor are they representative of all school leadership practices in Denmark. However, we set out to investigate the leadership practices relevant to teaching and learning processes and have subsequently arrived at some informed explanations. Danish principals and vice-principals are not educated as "instructional leaders" or even "educational leaders" but are trained in many leadership approaches as public administrators (VIVE, 2019). This means that the principals form their practice drawing on different approaches, and their instructional leadership approach in schools might be downplayed. However, the results show that the principals, by sharing responsibility among leadership team members and key teachers, fulfill many instructional leadership responsibilities while taking a more implicit approach. Shaked *et al.* (2021) discussed that the policy-borrowing (Steiner-Khamsi, 2019) between countries can be challenging and suggested that instructional leadership theory must adapt to and include national values. The present study confirms this variation of schooling across nations and indicates that instructional leadership practices must be adapted to local contexts, as suggested by other scholars (e.g., Keddie, 2013).

The study also holds several implications for further research both within the Danish context and internationally. First, it is important to note that our research was conducted within a single municipality, which may limit the transferability of the findings. Future studies using qualitative and quantitative methods could target more significant numbers of schools and municipalities to work toward developing a Danish model of instructional leadership with broader applicability, similar to linked studies by Qian *et al.* (2017) and Walker and Qian (2022). The first study constructed a model in one Chinese province and used this to sharpen and expand the model using data from six more diverse provinces. Discerning a more broad-based cross-municipalities model in Denmark could test and enrich the spread and functionality of the shared instructional leadership model emerging from this study.

Second, the exploratory power of our findings provides a nuanced understanding of Danish school leaders' overall engagement in improving teaching and learning processes. While some of the findings may not fully align with the existing literature on instructional leadership, they could motivate and inform more contextual, in-depth research internationally. As Dimmock (2020) states, "It is presumptuous to assume that research conducted in diverse world regions will somehow automatically resonate and connect to form a coherent and unified global whole" (p. 259). Therefore, Future research could adopt a cross-cultural comparative approach and contribute to understanding leadership and policy differences and similarities between schools and systems.

Conclusion

This article addresses the research question: *How does instructional leadership unfold in Danish schools?* Working with this research question, we present qualitatively informed explanations of how instructional leadership unfolds in Danish schools. First, we

demonstrate that principals work behind the scenes in the school engine room to establish structures that ensure teachers focus on student learning. Second, two leadership approaches emerged to facilitate student learning. Firstly, principals ensure that teachers have scheduled time for reflection, considering teachers' reflections on data as a method to support their professional development and, subsequently, a focus on student learning outcomes. Secondly, principals emphasize strong communities for collaboration at the schools, as teachers' collaboration is viewed as an insurance policy against poor-performing teachers and, therefore, a method to support student learning outcomes. Overall, the study provides research-informed examples of shared instructional leadership practices.

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Appendix

Categories	School policy documents* (12)	*n* of participants contributing (*N* = 18)
Leadership	2	18
Learning	12	17**
Culture	5	18
Collaboration	12	18

Note(s): *A combination of physical documents and webpage information covers school policies. School 1 conducted 4 documents, School 2 conducted 3 documents, and School 3 conducted 5 documents, totaling 12 documents
**A teacher at school three focused more on well-being rather than learning
Source(s): Authors' own creation/work

Table A1.
The categories based on the initial round of coding

Categories	School 1	School 2	School 3
Leadership	I believe that one of the most important aspects of management is the strategic implementation of concepts, especially when significant time and resources are invested, as is the case when it involves the entire municipality. It's essential to ensure these concepts are integrated into our current practices and systems effectively. (Principal)	Leading a large organization involves establishing structures and providing stability so that employees know what to expect and where they stand. (Principal)	In my daily role, personnel management plays a significant role. I directly oversee the leadership team, and I'm also closely involved in managing tasks with teachers and pedagogues. Educational leaders handle one-on-one discussions and department meetings, and I may join them when invited. So, my responsibilities encompass personnel management and strategic planning. (Principal)
Learning	We refer to them as educational theme meetings, held 10 times a year, and organized with the help of a committee. I have primarily taken the lead in structuring these meetings, with clear agendas, discussion topics, and occasional presentations (Member of the leadership team) Our understanding of learning: We aim for students to be engaged in their own learning process. Learning should be visible; learning should make sense (Document 1)	My starting point is to create stronger collaborative units where we collectively prioritize our professional approach. I want to emphasize that regardless of which teacher a student encounters, they receive the best possible education. It shouldn't be a matter of luck whether they have Carl or Sofie as their teacher. (Principal) In our School, we place safety and companionship at the center so that we can fulfill our most important task: high-quality academic learning for all students. (Webpage)	The leader is indeed focused on a learning-oriented approach and strives to discuss the next best steps for students. However, we encounter a challenge as we have training tests starting as early as fifth grade, and now extending through seventh, eighth, and ninth grades, which goes against this approach. (Teacher) We have a practice where we frequently use various tests to assess student performance. Last year, we created an overview of these tests. Teachers input the results from tests taken in the spring into a form for each child, and certain values are color-coded as red, yellow, or green. During collaborative meetings, we don't always delve deeply into individual students because our focus is on gaining a general overview and making broader decisions related to a class or transition (Member of the leadership team)

Table A2.
Example codes for the emerged categories

(*continued*)

Categories	School 1	School 2	School 3
Culture	Traditions help bind the community together, whether it's the spring concert or the soccer tournament. The large gatherings at our school before Christmas and by the pool before summer vacation are atmospheric highlights where we sing our school's own song (Webpage)	It's important for us to send a clear signal to both the ethnic Danish students and bilingual children that we prioritize Danish as the primary language in our school. However, there are situations where we find it necessary to use other languages to ensure effective communication. In such cases, we bring in interpreters if there are issues with understanding. (Member of the leadership team)	The feeling of togetherness is crucial – that we're in this as a team. We physically work side by side, treating it as a shared project with different roles. They rely on what we offer and the support we provide, and they can trust us with their concerns. Simultaneously, we depend on them to excel in their everyday work. (Member of the leadership team)
Collaboration	It's a challenge, and I'd like someone to review it with me. We found getting our colleagues to see its relevance this way easier. Through a reflective dialogue, you can clarify your own dilemma and potentially take action that inspires you to try it. [Yes.] So, there have been some key factors in how we engaged our colleagues and conveyed its significance. (Teacher)	We engage in some classroom supervision and action learning experiments, which provide opportunities for the teachers to learn from one another. It's essential to tap into the collective knowledge within our staff. We're currently focused on making this knowledge widely accessible and integrated throughout the school (Member of the leadership team)	Nonetheless, we have made substantial progress in achieving this parallelization across our educational practices From a management perspective, this approach tends to lean more towards resource optimization, while our colleagues adopt a perspective that emphasizes collaboration centered around students and subjects. (Teacher)

Source(s): Authors' own creation/work

Table A2.

Data examples	Categories	Theme
Leading a large organization involves establishing structures and providing stability so that employees know what to expect and where they stand (Principal School 2)	Leadership	Inside the 'engine room'
We refer to them as educational theme meetings, held 10 times a year, and organized with the help of a committee. I have primarily taken the lead in structuring these meetings, with clear agendas, discussion topics, and occasional presentations (Member of the leadership team School 1)		
We have also worked with our school's learning mindset, so what is essential in the approach to the children? What is vital concerning what creates learning, what makes commitment and motivation among the children? (Vice principal School 3)	Learning	
So, there are some, for example, a reading conference. That is, a structure has been created for how to capture the children who are particularly challenged, both in Danish and also in mathematics. And in such a setting the school management sets the direction for how to handle those children. (Teacher School 2)		
The leadership has had faith that we could handle it, and they are also relinquishing some leadership responsibility in this policy. In fact, they are placing a little bit of leadership on the process. (Teacher School 1)	Collaboration	

Source(s): Authors' own creation/work

Table A3.
Creating themes (sample)

Section	Examples of questions
1) Background information	Age, how long you have been a leader, and your educational background? Can you try to describe what a typical day is like for you as a leader?
2) Administration/ Leadership	How do you feel that the administration supports your management work? Can you describe how the collaboration with the administration takes place? How do you experience that quality reports, national tests/student results, and well-being measurements affect your work? What do you do to ensure that employees work with the goals at school? How does the leadership at the school work with data?
3) Students' learning	Can you try to describe how the leadership at the school works with the students' learning? How do you put the different teachers' professional skills into play? Have you set clear goals for the teachers regarding the student's learning?
4) School culture	Can you try to describe how you work with the school's culture? O How do you work with values and communication? Can you try to come up with some examples of what initiatives you have initiated at the school to support a strong professional culture?
5) Debriefing	Is it really understood that what you are experiencing is . . .. And . . . I'm about to run out of my questions. Is there anything you would like to mention in the conclusion? Thank you very much for your participation in the project

Table A4.
Interview questions

Source(s): Authors' own creation/work

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